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Saving ecopsychology from itself; the need for scientific enquiry

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ABSTRACT

The rise of environmentalism as a cultural ethos has had an impact on psychology. The field of psychology has witnessed the emergence of ecopsychology. At the foundational level, there has been significant writing that roots ecopsychology theory with transpersonal psychology. Roszak's (1992) pioneering work *The Voice of the Earth* has envisioned ecopsychology as a further exploration of human's spiritual link with nature. Such writings have resulted in a field of study heavily influenced by New Age and Eastern mystical traditions. But as a consequence, does that put ecopsychology in the domain of spirituality rather than psychology? This paper suggests ecopsychology would better served by rooting itself in experimental scientific psychology? Even when science is challenged as lacking depth, "Existential Experimental Psychology" (XXP) may build the bridge between the scientific methods and the need for deeper meaning. This paper concludes that the theoretical foundations for ecopsychology must move beyond philosophy and spirituality and suggest XXP as a solution to maintaining scientific rigor while not losing meaning.

The problem of definition

Defining ecopsychology is as easy as it is difficult. If we look at the word itself, it is simply the integration of ecology and psychology. So the basic premise for defining ecopsychology is to present a model articulating how ecology informs psychology and vice versa. Yet term ecopsychology has been used in a variety of contexts and any attempt to search for ecopsychology will undoubtedly lead to many unique destinations. Ecopsychology and its ideas have been used to justify everything from James Lovelock's (1990) "Gaia hypothesis" to establishing links between the outdoors and ADHD (Taylor et al, 2001). It is clear that the simple process of integrating psychology and ecology is not so simple.

This process becomes difficult due to the problem inherent in both ecology and particularly psychology. That problem is the lack of unified theory in both disciplines, making it nearly impossible to create a comprehensive theory of ecopsychology. Any attempt to move beyond the most basic premises of psychology and ecology creates an "ecopsychology" that is neither "eco" nor "psychology". For example, ecopsychology presented with a model of psychology taken from a humanistic perspective will result in eco-humanism. Presumably this could be said of any given theoretical orientation; eco-behaviourism, eco-neuroscience etc... The same issue occurs in choosing a specific theory of ecology. Which ecological should be chosen?

This dilemma presents itself in one example of ecopsychology presented by Theodore Roszak's (1992) book *The Voice of the Earth*; an exploration of ecopsychology. Roszak's premise is that although we are influenced by social relationships, we can be

inspired and comforted by the “natural” world. Roszak draws much from "deep ecology" which is the mystical and religious view of environmentalism. It also stems from critical approaches as deep ecologists point out that dominant cultures are white western Europeans and they ignore other “primitive” societies that emphasize spiritual, holistic and fulfilling sense of the natural world (Roszak, 1992). The idea that spiritual cultures are more holistic taps into the passionate zeal of ecopsychologists who blend the spiritual and natural world. However, passion aside, deep ecology is not necessarily the ecological viewpoint that must unite ecology and psychology. Regardless, this practice of supporting only chosen theories of psychology and ecology does not solidify ecopsychology as a solid theory. At this moment there is no “right” position from a theoretical standpoint and although it is certainly possible that Rozak’s model is the more "holistic" approach, that doesn’t actually mean anything. One can argue the label “holistic” can be added as a statement of validity or depth without any critical thought.

The danger of articulating ecopsychology from a construct that at best is speculative advances the traditional schisms within psychology. This continuing flaw within much of ecopsychology is reflected by the dominance of transpersonal psychology and deep ecology. Ecopsychology presented in this framework continues to divide rather than unify people under the very shaky banner of ecopsychology. The result is theoretical imperialism on ecopsychology whose endgame will be continued stratification, ultimately sinking ecopsychology into obscurity.

Ecopsychology at risk

As mentioned early, Rozak is highly critical of western society. The result is an ecopsychology more accurately stated as an integration of ecology and critical psychology. Rozak’s condemnation of a supposed white European world view encourages ecopsychology to join in the chant of criticising both western psychology and society. Ecopsychology then has great risk of becoming another “95 thesis” on the Wittenberg Door of the theoretical church of psychology. Drawing from critical psychology is another flaw because in many ways critical psychology is about advocating an alternative to the supposed western world view. Ecopsychologists in that model no longer become scientists and practitioners, but evangelists to a new type of worldview. Critical theories start from a list of societal deficiencies and not from theory-building. This type of ecopsychology will inevitably be an unsustainable model in the long run as culture is hard to define; it’s dynamic and fairly difficult to create an operational definition.

One can see how a critical approach to western society must be fairly attractive to environmentalists who want to right ecological injustice stemming from human domination. In this vein it would be easy to accept Rozak's theory as a call to action. In this sense the theory has very noble ambitions. Yet is this really psychology? Perhaps this type of venture is eco-social theory or eco-politics? If ecopsychology should somehow challenge traditional western society and human arrogance and power, is it not merely articulating a critical psychology perspective? In other words, ecopsychology is really not a separate theory in itself. Again it is a deep flaw to base ecopsychology on critical psychology as it can’t be characterised as a dominant force in psychology. Granted, it connects well with deep ecology, but that is hardly an accurate representation of ecology either. For examine Human Behavioural Ecology

(HBE) is far more representative of modern ecology yet is largely ignored by ecopsychology because of its reliance on evolutionary theory, which is of course a non-spiritual naturalist explanation.

Despite its reliance on critical psychology, Rozak's ecopsychology would be more accurately defined as the integration of transpersonal psychology with deep ecology. When exploring the dynamics of transpersonal approaches and deep ecology, it begs the question is ecopsychology science, philosophy or religion? The transpersonal approach to ecopsychology relies heavily on "supernatural" explanations (Lajoie & Shapiro, 1992). Supernatural explanations might be plausible, but there is no verifiable evidence to indicate that these claims are true. If transpersonal psychology is fuelled by subjective, phenomenological and anecdotal assertions, frankly, it sounds more like faith. Heavy reliance on transpersonal psychology often means a rejection of scientific empiricism as the fundamental source of truth. If ecopsychology is to become a discipline that rejects traditional western science, then it will simply fall into the schisms of traditional psychology; researchers vs practitioners; quantitative vs. qualitative; realists vs. relativists and this list goes on.

This reliance on spiritual explanations forces science to test something that it can't. The "supernatural" by its very definition cannot be explored via naturalistic methods. Rozak's model of ecopsychology relies heavily on transpersonal psychology and deep ecology; it ignores the majority of ecologists and psychologists who do not support those theories. New Age appears to have gotten a bit old and ecopsychology serves as a convenient modern platform to deliver this ancient message. Is spirituality really a pragmatic orientation to base ecopsychology? Can ecopsychologists really be expected to seek funds from the local city council with a funding proposal to engage teenagers in the outdoors because this activity will be based on a theoretical justification that they need to crawl back into the womb of mother Gaia?

Although inspirational to many, Rozak's ecopsychology is drifting from the research-focused approach presented by earlier environmental approaches. External environmental influences have always been a part of psychology and the interaction between human and environments is historically represented. Granted, environmental psychology was born out of a behaviourist orientation that sees the shaping of a person as process of responding to stimuli from their environment. The use of the term "environment" is not at all connected with environmentalism or nature, but has to do with the any environmental factors. For example, research into the influence of ward design on patient behaviour in mental hospitals (Ittelson et al, 1974) found significant links between the surrounding environments and human behaviour. So the concept of environment is inadequate when examining ecological systems, thus the need to narrow the focus to nature.

The environmental-behaviourist approach could be criticized for its lack of meaning. This use of the scientific method does not examine the human experience from a "deeper" perspective. The challenge for ecopsychology is that epistemological methods must move beyond environmental influences. If ecopsychologists lose their tweed jacket for a lab coat, will they not miss the deeper and more meaningful questions? Yet is the risk of losing "depth" valid. Not entirely as science must depend on a willingness to consider every idea and new way of thinking. Even if one

rejects so called “western” science, it does not automatically lead to a deep understanding.

If ecopsychology bases its ideas on things outside the realm of naturalistic explanations, it will eventually lead to conclusions based entirely on conjecture and make invalid arguments of causality while excluding possible explainable natural phenomena. A lack of explanation or limits of testability is not evidence of spiritual powers at work in nature. Even if a scientific ecopsychology cannot explain all aspects of human-environment interaction, it doesn't mean it is deficient and that non-scientific methods must be used. It only means that at this moment, it can't be tested or explained. Shouldn't ecopsychology require evidence before accepting claims, no matter how nice and altruistic? By producing a testable definition of psychological and ecological phenomena and then investigating for valid evidence, theories that can be scrutinized and challenged. Theories built entirely on anecdotal speculation and philosophy alone closes the process of examination and truly become shallow. Even if many proponents of ecopsychology would be sceptical of relying on science, this is ironic because they are sceptical about a methodology that emphasises scepticism!

The current agenda for defining ecopsychology needs to be about investigating ideas in order to create a build-able theory and ecopsychology should be based on critical thinking, not just criticism. In the establishment and development of a psychological theory must eventually lead to a research agenda. For example, the early literature on emotional intelligence (EI) attempts to both define and quantify. Matthews et al (2004) takes a scientific approach to EI as a new construct. This is achieved by defining the philosophical and historical context attempt to explain the conceptions of EI and then establish a research agenda for EI (Matthews et al, 2004). Of course, scientific methodology may ignore valid explanations of human-world interaction; but if evidence eventually emerges for those ideas then ecopsychology can remain flexible and open to new paradigms. Should that not be the research agenda for ecopsychology? A research agenda that acknowledges the philosophical and historical context for ecopsychology, defines the construct within and then establishes a research agenda for exploration.

Research with depth

Environmental-behavioural orientations can be rightly criticised for providing no real depth of meaning. It can establish statistically significant relationships between human and environment yet lack depth of meaningful understanding of the human-ecology interaction. This lack of depth can be a motivator for an all out rejection of scientific methods. Yet, as stated earlier, a model of ecopsychology lacking any quantifiable validity is not depth either. Perhaps the solution to this need for scientific enquiry that results in meaningful understanding is the process of XXP (Greenberg et al, 2004). Existential concepts are vital in understanding the human experience. For example Rollo May (1958) conceptualised modes of existence as “*umwelt*, *mitwelt*, *eigenwelt*”. May suggested that we live in all three realms of existence the physical aspects of both the internal and external environments (*umwelt*), the personal relationships of the individual (*mitwelt*), and the individual's consciousness (*eigenwelt*). Ecopsychology could focus on the aspect of “*unwelt*” as a way to address *mitwelt* and *eigenwelt* in a theoretical model. Existential philosophy embraces knowledge as “more than the sum of parts” and is a helpful model for answering

questions of depth and meaning. In relation to ecopsychology, existential theory could be a guiding framework for finding meaning in the natural world. Rollo May's being in the world (world around) emphasizes the unity of person and environment. Perhaps existential philosophy is a more functional model of ecopsychology than transpersonal psychology?

Existential philosophy alone does not satisfy all the questions surround ecopsychology. There is still that the need for scientific exploration. If ecopsychology rests on existential ideas alone, then it falls prey to the trappings of transpersonal psychology as well. One attempt to merge meaning with quantifiable research is Experimental Existential Psychology (XXP). Existential ideas have been in the domain of philosophers and practitioners of existential psychology. Most literature on existential perspective relied on introspection and is not compatible with the scientific method. However XXP researchers suggest experimental psychology provides techniques like "priming" and have analysed sources of human behaviour characterised by existential psychology (Greenberg et al 2004).

Greenberg et al (2004) acknowledge that historically, much of the issues of existence fall within the domain of philosophy. However, now experimental psychologists are studying these existential concepts using the scientific method. XXP is supported by evidence based research into existential ideas and their impact on human behaviour (Greenberg et al, 2004). The future challenge is on further integration of existential philosophy and modern developments like cognitive neuroscience (Greenberg et al, 2004). XXP as a way of investigating psychological phenomena is a relative new approach to integrating issues of existential meaning with the scientific method. However it generates of model that ecopsychology can be firmly rooted in.

Thus, building a sustainable model of ecopsychology starts with two premises; first that psychology is the science of behaviour and cognitions and ecology is the scientific of interactions between organisms with their environment. Secondly, ecopsychology must be defined as the scientific study of behaviour and cognition resulting from the interaction of humans and their environment. With that as an operational definition, research can then examine that interaction. In addition, to further differentiate ecopsychology from classical environmental psychology, it must also address issues of meaning and "umwelt." Ecopsychology can incorporate XXP a theoretical approach that provides both meaning and scientific rigour.

Conclusion

Transpersonal or any other ideas of psychology that are not quantifiable have fascinating philosophical implications; as such they should be pursued as philosophical traditions. Phenomenological and anecdotal experience is a wonderful way to understand the human condition and can lead to hypothesis generation. But if our conclusions cannot be tested or even falsified, they do not belong in scientific psychology. Much of the discourse around ecopsychology does not really belong in the realm of empirical investigation. It would be better labelled eco-philosophy (ecosophy) or ecospirituality. One could argue that there is no room for a naturalistic word view in ecopsychology, as evident in the predominance of ecopsychology literature that promotes supernatural and mystical concepts. Ecopsychology has been held hostage by the spiritual supernaturalists. However, if ecopsychology could be

based on scientific investigation, it will be comprehensive in its ability to explain and make falsifiable predictions about human environment interactions.

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